

One of the great classics in the motorsport calendar, the Francorchamps 24 hour race was born in 1924. At that time and until the '60s it was run for the same type of sports-prototypes and Gran Turismo cars that competed in the Targa Florio in Sicily, the Brescia-Rome-Brescia Mille Miglia and the Le Mans 24-hours races.

The Circuit

There are few sights to equal that of a racing car being driven in anger from La Source hairpin into Eau Rouge, the awesome left-right bend at the bottom of the hill. Getting the entry right is vital as precious seconds are lost if you take the second part too slowly and the car then loses momentum going up the hill to Les Combes.

This is followed by the tricky downhill Rivage and the fast Pouhon corners and then into the challenging right hander at Stavelot which leads onto the ultra-fast Blanchimont bend. After that, it's hard on the brakes for the Bus Stop chicane and then flat out until more heavy breaking for La Source. There's nothing "mickey mouse" about this place: it's a real road-racing track.

So just imagine driving around it for your share of 24-hours.

As Alain Prost has said, "it's the best circuit in the world." Many top F1, sports and "tin-top" drivers agree with that sentiment. Which is one important reason why this event is considered a classic.

Names and Records

Over the years, the race has continuously attracted strong driver/car combinations and has witnessed titanic battles, some of which have been fought to the very last minutes of the 24th hour. Just ask Steve Soper or Eric van de Poele about their fight to the flag in '92, when Soper pipped the other BMW driver by seconds.....

Past winners include Chinetti/Lucas (2 litre V12 Ferrari) in 1949 and the 1950 and first F1 World Champion Giuseppe Farina who shared the victorious 4.5 litre V12 Ferrari with Britain's first F1 World Champion (1958), Mike Hawthorn in 1953.

Fellow Italian constructor Alfa Romeo has seven victories to its credit, all achieved between 1928-38, and Ford currently has six wins; all but one being with the Capri model. Porsche scored a hat-trick in the years '67 to '69 and notched up its fourth win in 1993 in the hands of current IndyCar racer Christian Fittipaldi, Jean-Pierre Jarier and Uwe Alzen.

But the marque that's scored the most victories - 17 to-date - is BMW. Pascal Ickx - Jacky's elder brother - and Gerard Langlois started it off with victory in the 1965 race. Jacky himself won the next year with Armin Hahne.

Gerhard Berger is another of the F1 big guns to have won here, when he accompanied Marc Surer and Roberto Ravaglia to victory in the '85 event at the wheel of a 635 coupé. Ravaglia himself won again in '88 and last year and shares the honour of achieving three victories in this race with fellow BMW pilote, Thierry Tassin ('83, '86, '94).

Jean-Michel Martin has won the event four times - twice with a Ford Capri, twice with an M3 BMW but this record may well be equalled this year.... Then there's Tom Walkinshaw, nowadays better known for his Benetton and Ligier association, winner in '81 with Pierre Dieudonné (Mazda Wankel) and again in '84 with Hans Heyer and Win Percy, in a Jaguar.

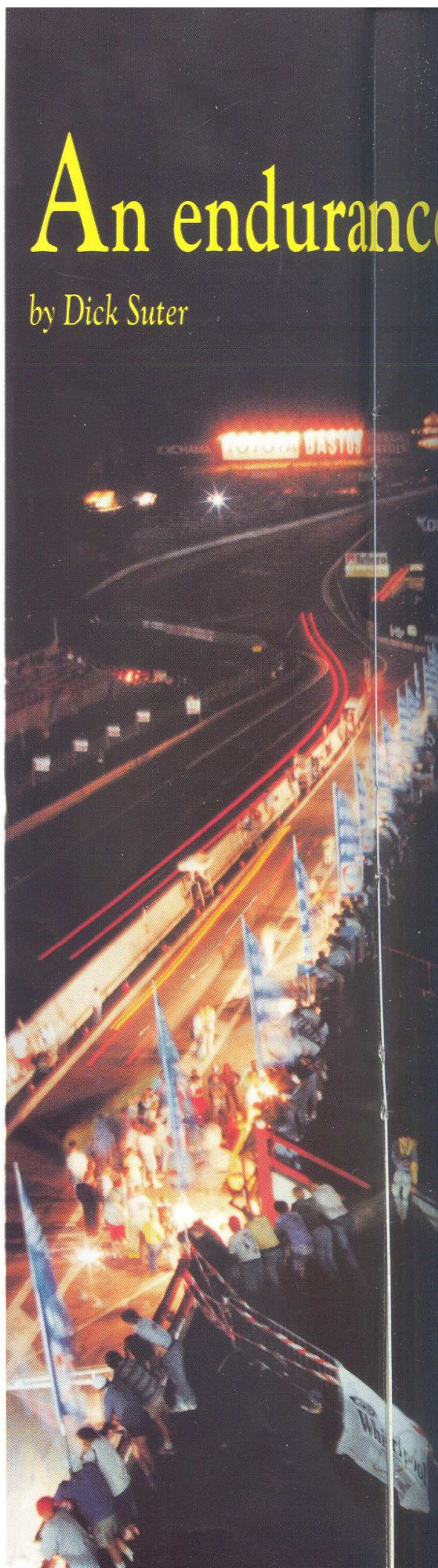
And if you're big on alliteration, how about 1968 when the three Ks - Erwin Kremer, Helmut Kelleners and Willi Kauhsen - drove their Porsche to victory?

Stars and Cars

This year's race has another star studded cast competing in the FIA Supercars Group 1, Class 2. It's from this class that the overall winner is most likely to come. The 2-litre Super Touring formula is the class act 'on

An endurance

by Dick Suter



France classic

Australian, Belgian, British, French, German, Italian, Japanese and Spanish race tracks. Close racing, cars we can all recognise, overtaking, too. In short, a winning formula.

Favourites have to be the four Fina Bastos entered BMW 318i machines, two prepared by the crack Schnitzer tuning company; two by the equally successful Bigazzi outfit.

Schnitzer's line-up includes "smokin" Jo Winkelhock, winner of the BTCC in 1993 and now competing for honours in the German series; the vastly experienced '92 co-winner Steve Soper, who is now upholding BMW honour in the Japanese series - where he won the latest round -, and flying Dutchman Peter Cox who is another series contender in the German series.

In the other Schnitzer car are last year's co-winner and leader of the Belgian Touring Car Championship, Thierry Tassin, German hot-shoe Jörg Müller and Spanish touring car exponent Antonio Albacete.

Representing Bigazzi is an equally strong team. Three-times F1 World Champion, Nelson Piquet, returns to the race after finishing 4th last year. His co-drivers are rally and touring car ace Marc Duez - recent winner of the Nürburgring 24-hour race -, and Roberto Ravaglia. Ravaglia has arguably the best credentials of any touring car driver anywhere for he has won seven

touring car championships in 12 years, including the German, Italian, European and the World Touring Car Championships. Watch him when he's on a charge. He's quick.....

The second Bigazzi car will be driven by Yvan Mueller - brother of racer Cathy - who has established himself a front-runner in winter time ice racing and a winner in the French Touring Car Championship. Co-drivers are Alexander Burgstaller, one of the leading lights in the German 2-litre series, and Ingo Hoffmann, another ex-Formula 1 Brazilian driver who enjoys fun and success in endurance racing these days.

In the Belgian Procar series, the only car/driver combination to have won a race this year apart from Tassin/BMW is Pierre-Alain Thibaut/Opel. Thibaut, a former Belgian Touring Cars (Procar) Champion, is teamed up with former winner Eric van de Poele and Jean-François Hemroulle. An Opel France Vectra will be driven by experienced Frenchmen Alain Cudini and Eric Helary and Volker Strycek. Two strong entries. Throw into the equation the tuning skills of Dany Snobeck and either of these two cars could be contenders for top honours on Sunday afternoon. A third Vectra has been entered by British driver Ian Khan, who will be sharing with Masahiro Kimoto and Dirk Scoysman.

Then there is the Belgian Audi Club's brace of Audi 80 Quattros, breathed on by ace

tuner Franz Dubois. Although they have generally been slower than the BMWs and Opel on this very fast track at previous Procar rounds, don't write this team off, particularly if the race is run totally or partly under heavy rain, for 4-wheel drive could be a great asset.

Lead driver is Philippe Adams, who turned successfully to touring cars from single-seaters last year, losing out on the Procar Championship only by the smallest of margins at the last round. His co-drivers are South African touring car ace Terry Moss and regular team-mate Vincent Vosse. The second car will be handled by Wolfgang Haugg, Christian Abt and Georges Cremer. Consider them dark horses.

When Honda announced at the end of last year that it would be entering the Belgian, British and German Super Touring series it was clear that the effort would be a serious one. And, according to expectations, in each of these three countries, the Accords have improved with every round. Ex-motor cycle star Didier de Radigues has been sharing the Procar races with Bertrand Gachot whenever F1 races have not conflicted and the 24-hours does conflict with the German Grand Prix so, while Gachot goes to Hockenheim, Didier will have two new team-mates for the race: rallyman Patrick Snijers and Swiss driver Philippe Faure.

Last year Group 1 BMWs took the first four places, followed by four of the same marque competing in Group N. This year, too, Golfs and Sunnys, Astras and Corollas will be out there fighting for class honours. And an MPV Peugeot 806 has been entered by the Belgian importer to be driven by IndyCar racer Eric Bachelart, Philip Verellen and Pascal Witmeur.

The Procar Element

The 24-hour race counts as one of the 15 rounds that constitutes the Belgian Touring Car Championship (Procar) which, like the British, French, German, Italian, Japanese and Spanish championships is for 2 litre "Super Touring" cars. The Procar series also has additional classes for "privateers". Scoring follows F1 practice -10 for a win, then 6, 4, 3, 2, down to 1 for sixth place. All Procar races except this one last for 30 minutes.

Only those drivers who are regulars in the Procar Championship are eligible for points from this race. The best placed Procar inscribed driver in the race will thus obtain 10 points, irrespective of his place in the general classification. Those points will be richly deserved, too. 24-hours, after all, demands a whole lot of stamina from car, driver and team.

But most reckon it's worth every minute of it.